

2006 Executive Summary

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Annual Report

The purpose of this report is to document the actions of governments—those that repress religious expression, persecute innocent believers, or tolerate violence against religious minorities, as well as those that respect, protect, and promote religious freedom. We strive to report equally on abuses against adherents of all religious traditions and beliefs. The governments we report on range from those that provided a high level of protection for religious freedom in the broadest sense (those that "generally respected" religious freedom) to totalitarian regimes that sought to control religious thought and expression and regarded some or all religious groups as threats.

The promotion of religious freedom is a core objective of U.S. foreign policy and is part of the U.S. Department of State's mission. The commitment of the United States to religious freedom and to international human rights standards is also articulated in such documents as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which clearly states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. As an expression of our deep national commitment to these freedoms, the department monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies directed toward regions and countries, and develops programs to promote religious freedom. Through transformational diplomacy, the United States seeks to promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right and as a source of stability for all countries. In so doing, it strives to assist newly formed democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience, assist religious and human rights NGOs in promoting religious freedom, and identify and promote changes in the policies and actions of regimes that severely persecute their citizens or others on the basis of religious belief.

The large majority of the world's people have religious beliefs, which they hold dear. It is because religion is viewed by people as having such a central place in their lives that many regard religious freedom as the most important right. At the same time, global trends, regional distinctions, local preferences, and personal histories often lead to significant overlap between religious identity and ethnicity, class, language group, or political affiliation. The right to religious freedom can be abused in many ways both blatant and subtle. The following typology, although far from exhaustive, represents the major types of abuses identified in this report, and may serve as a helpful guide to assessing trends in religious freedom: totalitarian/authoritarian regimes, state hostility toward minority religions, state neglect of societal discrimination, discriminatory legislation that favors majority religions, and denunciation of certain religions as cults.

The first and most stark category of abuses is seen in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which seek to control religious thought and expression. Such regimes regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of their religious beliefs or their independence from central authority. Some governments are hostile and repressive towards particular groups, often identifying them as "security threats." It is important to distinguish between groups of religious believers who express legitimate political grievances, and those that misuse religion to advocate violence against other religious groups or the state. This report documents it as an abuse when a government broadly represses religious expression among a peacefully practicing population on the grounds of security concerns. For example, the war on terror must not be used as an excuse to repress peaceful worship. The report also notes those countries and situations in which authorities' over-zealous actions taken against observant believers suspected of extremism have had the principal effect of restricting religious freedom. In some countries, for example, many are afraid to attend mosque frequently lest the government characterize them as religious extremists. A second category of abuses occurs with state hostility toward minority or non-approved religions. These governments implement policies designed to demand that adherents recant their faith, cause religious group members to flee the country, or intimidate and harass certain religious

groups. This report notes, for example, when state repression of religious groups was linked to ethnic identity because a government dominated by a majority ethnic group suppressed the faith of a minority group. Also detailed in this report are instances where governments used an individual's religious devotion as a proxy for determining his or her political ideology, which resulted in the intimidation and harassment of certain religious groups.

Yet a third kind of abuse stems from a state's failure to address either societal discrimination or societal abuses against religious groups. In these countries, legislation may discourage religious discrimination and persecution, but officials fail to prevent conflicts, harassment, or other harmful acts against minority religious groups. Protecting religious freedom is not just a matter of having good laws in writing. It requires active work by a government at all levels to prevent abuses by governmental or private actors, to bring abusers to justice, and to provide redress to victims, when appropriate. Governments have the responsibility to ensure that their agents do not commit abuses of religious freedom, and to protect religious freedom by rule of law in a way that ensures that private actors obey. In addition, governments must foster an environment of respect and tolerance for all people. This report documents cases in which a government has failed to prevent violations of religious freedom, or has not responded with consistency and vigor to violations of religious freedom by private actors, nongovernmental entities, or local law enforcement officials. In a fourth category are abuses that occur when governments have enacted discriminatory legislation or policies that favor majority religions and disadvantage minority religions. This often results from historical dominance by the majority religion and a bias against new or minority religions. In a number of these countries, governments have acted on a widely held ideology that links national identity with a particular religion by enacting legislation that favors the majority religion and discriminates against minority religions. Though the majority of the population in such a country may worship without harassment, such a situation cannot be characterized as true freedom to choose one's faith and worship freely. Furthermore, government backing of a religion can result in restrictions even on worshippers in the majority when the state enforces only one interpretation of that religion.

Finally, the practice of discriminating against certain religions by identifying them as dangerous cults or sects is a common type of abuse, even in countries where religious freedom is otherwise respected. For example, this report discusses denunciations against Shi'ite Muslims in Sunni-majority countries, and vice versa, especially where governments have taken it upon themselves to regulate religious belief and practice according to one of these faith traditions.

Between July 1, 2005, and June 30, 2006, the period covered by this report, wide-ranging events had implications for religious freedom. One trend was a significant increase in international media attention to religious freedom issues and controversies. Such events included an international backlash in February 2006 against the republication of a series of twelve cartoons depicting satirical images of Mohammed, originally published in September 2005 by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. In choosing to publish them, the European media cited freedom of expression. However, many observers, especially in Europe's minority Muslim communities, interpreted this as a direct attack on or demonstration of intolerance toward the Islamic faith.

The remainder of this Executive Summary consists of two parts. Part I summarizes, on a country-by-country basis, actions the U.S. Government has taken to advance international religious freedom in the nations designated "Countries of Particular Concern" for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Part II provides a summary of conditions in those countries where religious freedom is of significant interest, including in Countries of Particular Concern. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies, and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken to promote or protect religious freedom. In most cases, these countries exhibit one or more of the abuses outlined above.

PART I: U.S. ACTIONS IN COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF Act) requires an annual review of the status of religious freedom worldwide and the designation of countries that have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom" during the reporting period as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs). Following the designation, a period of negotiation may ensue, in which the United States seeks to work with a designated country to bring about change.

Subsequently, depending upon the results of these discussions, one or more actions are chosen by the secretary of state, as required by the IRF Act. These actions range from sanctions to an agreement to a waiver. In countries where U.S. sanctions are currently in force, the Secretary may designate one or more of these sanctions jointly to fulfill the requirements of the IRF Act and other U.S. law. The ambassador at large for international religious freedom and his office take actions to promote religious freedom in each CPC throughout the year. This section highlights actions by other U.S. Government officials to promote religious freedom and to encourage the governments to take positive steps to increase religious freedom. In November 2005, the Secretary re-designated Burma, China, North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam as CPCs. Further details on U.S. actions in CPCs and other countries may be found in each individual country report.

Burma

Every year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Burma as a CPC. In 2005 the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of a prohibition on exports or other transfers of defense articles and defense services pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government has a wide array of financial and trade sanctions in place against Burma for its violations of human rights. The U.S. Government advocated religious freedom with all facets of society, including with government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, and scholars, foreign diplomats, and international business and media representatives. Through outreach and travel, when not blocked by regime officials, embassy representatives offered support to and exchanged information with many otherwise isolated local nongovernmental organizations and religious leaders.

China

The Secretary of State has designated the People's Republic of China a CPC every year since 1999. In 2005, the secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of the restriction of exports of crime control and detection instruments and equipment pursuant to the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the Consulates General in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenyang made a concerted effort to encourage greater religious freedom in China, condemning abuses while supporting positive trends. In public and in private, U.S. officials repeatedly urged the P.R.C. Government to respect citizens' constitutional and internationally recognized rights to exercise religious freedom and to release all those serving prison sentences for religious activities. President Bush regularly raised religious freedom in his meetings with government leaders, including in his April 2006 and November and September 2005 meetings with President Hu Jintao. Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Barry Lowenkron held talks on religious freedom during a February 2006 visit to Beijing. The U.S. ambassador to China highlighted problems of religious freedom and cases of individual religious prisoners of conscience in his public speeches and in his private diplomacy with Chinese officials.

Eritrea

The Secretary of State first designated Eritrea as a CPC in 2004. As the action under the IRF Act, in 2005 the Secretary of State ordered the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of any defense articles and services controlled under the Arms Export Control Act, excluding certain items such as those used for peacekeeping and anti-terrorism efforts. U.S. embassy officials meet regularly with leaders of the religious community. The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officers have raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

Iran

Every year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a CPC. In 2005, the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of restrictions on U.S. security assistance pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, and thus it cannot raise directly the restrictions that the Iranian Government places on religious freedom and other abuses the government commits against adherents of minority religious groups. The U.S. Government has expressed strongly its objections to the government's harsh and oppressive treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant UN and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, and

diplomatic initiatives toward states concerned about religious freedom in Iran. The United States calls on other countries with bilateral relations with Iran to use those ties to press Iran on religious freedoms and human rights. For example, at the fall 2005 session of the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, the United States co-sponsored a successful resolution against Iran, which specifically addressed religious freedom issues among other violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The United States has publicly condemned the treatment of the Baha'is in UN resolutions. On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department has addressed publicly the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the country, and the U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements.

North Korea

Every year since 2001, the Secretary of State has designated the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) as a CPC. In 2005, the Secretary continued the designation of a sanction, consisting of restrictions on normal trade relations and other trade benefits pursuant to the Trade Act of 1974 and the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government does not have diplomatic relations with the D.P.R.K., and raises its concerns about the deplorable state of human rights in the country with other countries and in multilateral fora. For example, the U.S. cosponsored a successful resolution that addressed restrictions on religious freedom at the UN General Assembly in fall 2005. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill has publicly stated that dialogue on the D.P.R.K.'s human rights record will be a part of any future normalization process between the D.P.R.K. and the United States. In April 2005, several State Department officials testified before the House International Relations Committee on the D.P.R.K.'s human rights record and U.S. Government efforts to implement the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA). They and the U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom have repeatedly raised awareness of the deplorable human rights conditions in the D.P.R.K. through speeches before U.S. audiences. In August 2005, the president appointed Jay Lefkowitz as Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea, in keeping with one provision of the NKHRA. Since his appointment, Special Envoy Lefkowitz has urged other countries, including the Republic of Korea and Japan, to join the growing international campaign urging the D.P.R.K. to address its human rights conditions and abuses of religious freedom. Also in 2005, the U.S. Department of State provided a grant of \$496,000 to the National Endowment for Democracy to improve and expand monitoring and reporting on human rights conditions in the D.P.R.K., as well as a grant to Freedom House for a series of conferences and other activities dedicated to urging the regime to end its abuses. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America also provide regular Korean-language broadcasting. U.S. Government policy allows U.S. citizens to travel to the country, and a number of churches and religious groups have organized efforts to alleviate suffering caused by shortages of food and medicine.

Saudi Arabia

The Secretary of State first designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC in 2004. Senior U.S. officials and embassy officers met with senior Saudi Government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and the U.S. ambassador also raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. U.S. Government officials also met with the Saudi Government to raise their concerns over the dissemination of intolerant literature and an extremist ideology, and discussed the need for the Saudi Government to honor consistently its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote tolerance toward non-Muslims, and respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. These discussions made it possible to identify and confirm a number of key policies that the government is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purposes of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups. These include policies designed to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology, both within Saudi Arabia and around the world, to protect the right to private worship, and to curb harassment of religious practice. For example, the Saudi Government is conducting a comprehensive revision of textbooks and educational curricula to weed out disparaging remarks toward religious groups, a process that will take one to two more years. The Saudi Government is also retraining teachers and the religious police to ensure that the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims are protected and to promote tolerance and combat extremism. The Saudi Government has also created a Human

Rights Commission to address the full range of human rights complaints. In view of these developments, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Sudan

Every year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Sudan a CPC. Among the numerous U.S. sanctions against Sudan, in 2005 the Secretary continued the designation of one sanction consisting of the use of the voice and vote of the U.S. to abstain on or oppose loans or other uses of the funds of the international financial institutions to or for Sudan, pursuant to the International Financial Institutions Act, as the action under the IRF Act. The U.S. Government encouraged the Government of National Unity (GNU) to fulfill the promises of religious freedom made in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim National Constitution, and made clear that restrictions on religious freedom impede improved relations between the United States and Sudan. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick hosted an interfaith forum with Christian and Muslim leaders in Khartoum during his November 2005 visit. Embassy officials frequently met with leaders of different religious groups. The U.S. embassy has developed working relationships with a number of Muslim and Christian leaders, and U.S. officials met on a regular basis with such leaders in Khartoum, Juba, and on trips outside the capital.

Vietnam

During the period covered by this report, significant improvements occurred in the status of religious freedom in Vietnam (see Part II). First designated a CPC in 2004, the United States and Vietnam worked closely together in the months that ensued, resulting in an exchange of letters in May 2005 that covered the following issues: full implementation of the new laws on religious activities; instruction of local authorities to strictly and completely adhere to the new legislation and ensure their compliance; facilitation of the process by which religious congregations are able to open houses of worship; and special consideration to prisoners and cases of concern raised by the United States during the granting of prisoner amnesties. This exchange of letters mitigated other actions under the IRF Act. The U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City maintain an active and regular dialogue with senior and working-level government officials to advocate greater religious freedom. U.S. officials also meet and communicate regularly with religious leaders of the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Muslim communities, including religious activists under government scrutiny. When traveling outside of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, embassy and consulate general officers regularly met with provincial Religious Affairs Committees, village elders, local clergy, and believers. The U.S. ambassador and other U.S. officials, including the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, raised concerns about the registration and recognition difficulties faced by religious organizations; the detention and arrest of religious figures; the difficulties Protestants face in the Central Highlands and northern Vietnam, including the Northwest Highlands; and other restrictions on religious freedom with the prime minister, deputy prime minister, government cabinet ministers, Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) leaders, provincial officials, and others. The ambassador at large for international religious freedom and his staff traveled to various regions of the country on six occasions between 2003 and 2006 to meet religious leaders and government authorities. The U.S. Government has regularly worked for the release of prisoners deemed to be detained primarily for religious reasons. The government during the period covered by this report freed four individuals viewed by various sources as having been imprisoned in connection with religious activities.

PART II: COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONDITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

This section provides a summary of conditions in a number of countries where religious freedom is of significant interest. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies, and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken in the reporting period to promote or protect religious freedom.

Afghanistan

The Afghan constitution states that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law." However, it also states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." While the government generally respected the right to religious freedom, decades of war and years of Taliban rule and weak democratic institutions, including an

unreformed judiciary, have contributed to a conservative culture of intolerance, which at times manifested in acts of harassment and violence against reform-minded Muslims and religious minorities. Widespread condemnations that arose during a case of conversion, and a case of censorship, increased concerns about the ability of Afghans to freely practice their religion. Due to societal pressure, some minority religious believers hide their religion and the Afghan Sikh and Hindu populations faced a number of problems. Relations among the different sects of Islam in the country continued to be difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a have faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. Despite these problems, the government took some positive steps during the reporting period to increase religious freedom. The Ministries of Women's Affairs and Religious Affairs worked together to provide women with greater access to mosques. The government also responded positively to international approaches on religious freedom and worked effectively on high-profile legal cases such as the blasphemy charges against journalist Mohaqeq Nasab and the apostasy charges against Christian convert Abdul Rahman.

Brunei

Despite constitutional provisions providing for the full and unconstrained exercise of religious freedom, the Government of Brunei used a range of laws to restrict the expansion of religions other than official Islam. Brunei's various religious groups coexist peacefully, but ecumenical interaction is hampered by the dominant Islamic religious ethos, which discourages Muslims from learning about other faiths and forbids persons of other faiths from proselytizing. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of activities to explain and propagate Islam, and they also offer financial incentives, housing, and new mosques for converts to Islam.

Burma

The Burmese Government's repressive, authoritarian military regime imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently committed abuses of the right to freedom of religion. Most adherents of registered religions were permitted to worship as they chose, but the government continued to infiltrate and monitor activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. It also systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom. The government actively promoted Theravada Buddhism, particularly among minority ethnic groups, and adherence to Buddhism remains generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks. Anti-Muslim violence continued, as did the close monitoring of Muslims' activities. Restrictions on worship of other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued throughout the country.

China

The Chinese constitution provides for freedom of religious belief; however, the government's respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor. There was little evidence that new regulations on religious affairs, which took effect in 2005, improved the situation of religious freedom; they continued to define only government-approved practices and faiths as normal or legitimate. In most areas of the country, religious believers could worship without difficulty in officially approved venues. However, in some areas there were significant restrictions. Officials in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region tightly controlled religious activity. In one case in August 2005, Uighur teacher Aminan Momixi and 30 students were detained after Momixi held Qur'an study sessions in her home during summer vacation. In apparent retaliation for the international human rights and religious freedom activism of Uighur Muslim Rebiya Kadeer, the Chinese Government detained and reportedly abused her three adult sons, charging them with financial crimes related to her business ventures in Xinjiang. Followers of Tibetan Buddhism, including in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and Tibetan areas of China, faced restrictions on their religious practice and ability to organize. Repression of unregistered Protestant church networks and "house" churches continued to be widely reported. House church leaders sometimes faced detention, formal arrest and sentences of reeducation or imprisonment. Government officials continued to scrutinize closely contacts between citizens and foreigners involved in religion, detaining some citizens for providing religious information to foreigners and preventing some religious figures from traveling abroad, including church historian Zhang Yinan, whom authorities placed under house arrest and refused to issue a passport. In June 2006, Henan Province Christian pastor Zhang Rongliang, was sentenced to 7-1/2 years in prison for obtaining a passport through fraud and illegal border crossing. "Underground" Catholic bishops also faced repression, in large part due to their loyalty to the Vatican, which the government

accused of interfering in China's internal affairs. The government showed some signs of willingness to improve relations with the Vatican after the appointment of Pope Benedict XVI but Beijing and the Vatican clashed in April 2006 over control of the process of ordaining bishops. The government continued its repression of groups that it categorized as "cults" in general and of small Christian-based groups and the Falun Gong in particular. In June 2006 Pastor Xu Shuangfu and five other members of the "Three Grades of Servants" church, which China considers a cult, were sentenced to death in a murder case involving conflict between the church and the Eastern Lightning group, which China also considers a cult. Scores of Three Grades of Servants church members were tried during the period covered by this report. Falun Gong practitioners continued to face arrest, detention, and imprisonment, and there have been credible reports of deaths due to torture and abuse. Practitioners who refuse to recant their beliefs are sometimes subjected to harsh treatment in prisons, and reeducation through labor camps and extra-judicial "legal education" centers.

Cuba

The Cuban constitution recognizes the right of citizens to profess and practice any religious belief within the framework of respect for the law; however, in law and in practice the government continued to place restrictions on freedom of religion.

Some religious figures who criticized the Cuban Government's totalitarian system in sermons were subjected to intense harassment. In general, unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. The government maintained its policy of permitting apolitical religious activity to take place in government-approved sites. However, citizens worshipping in officially sanctioned churches were subject to surveillance by state security forces, and the government's efforts to maintain a strong degree of control over religion continued. The Cuban Government implemented new regulations that restricted the operation of house churches but eased its policy on issuing work permits to foreign Catholic clergy.

Egypt

The Egyptian constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Religious practices that conflict with the government's interpretation of Shari'a, or Islamic law, are prohibited. Members of the non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the Egyptian Government generally worship without harassment; however, tradition and some aspects of the law discriminated against religious minorities, including Christians and particularly Baha'is, which are not recognized legally. The government continued to deny civil documents, including identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to members of the Baha'i community, which numbers 500 to 2,000 persons. It appealed an April 4 decision by the administrative court, that supported the right of Baha'i citizens to receive ID cards and birth certificates with religion noted on the documents. Many churches continued to encounter difficulty with obtaining permits for church repair and rebuilding, despite a presidential decree in December 2005 stating that such permits, previously requiring his approval, could be granted by provincial governors. In the past, the government did not provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. Over the past 2 years, approximately 32 Muslims who had converted from Christianity have been issued verdicts allowing them to recover their original Christian identities. Metwalli Ibrahim Metwalli Saleh, arrested by the State Security Intelligence Service (SSIS) in May 2003, apparently for his views on Islam, including support of the right to convert, was released on April 23 after receiving eight separate rulings from the Supreme State Security Emergency Court in his favor and an official statement from the state security prosecutor ordering his release.

Eritrea

Religious freedom did not improve overall, and in some areas deteriorated further. The Eritrean Government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered, and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups. Following a 2002 decree that religious groups must register, the Government closed all religious facilities not belonging to the country's four principal religious institutions: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, and Islam. The government continued to harass, arrest, and detain members of independent Evangelical groups (including Pentecostals),

Jehovah's Witnesses, and a reform movement within the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The government also intervened in procedural and administrative decisions of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by displacing the patriarch in favor of its own candidate. The government failed to register any of the four religious groups who applied in 2002 for registration, and it restricted religious meetings and arrested individuals during religious ceremonies, gatherings, and prayer meetings. There were also reports of forced recantations. Some religious detainees were held in harsh conditions that included extreme temperature fluctuations with limited or no access to family.

India

The Indian constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. While the national government took positive steps in key areas to improve religious freedom, the status of religious freedom generally remained the same during the period covered by this report. The United Progressive Alliance government continued to implement a platform based on respect for secular government and religious tolerance. The vast majority of Indians of every religious faith lived in peaceful coexistence. However, some extremists continued to perceive ineffective prosecution of attacks on religious minorities, particularly at the state and local level, as a signal that they could commit such violence with impunity. Religious conversion remained a highly contentious issue and terrorists continued deadly violence against religious targets. The national government reacted in a swift manner to rein in Hindu extremists, prevent revenge attacks and reprisal, and assure the Muslim community of its safety. In March 2006, the government of Rajasthan passed an anti-conversion bill, but it had not been approved by the governor by the end of the period covered by this report, and awaited presidential review. In August 2005, the Nanavati commission, tasked with conducting a re-inquiry into the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, released its report, citing several prominent Congress Party leaders for complicity in the violence, implicating law enforcement personnel in the deaths, and setting up committees to dispense compensation for victims' families. In response to a supreme court mandate, in February 2006, the Gujarat police stated that it would reinvestigate 1600 of the approximately 2,000 cases that were filed and closed in 2002.

Iran

There was a further deterioration of the extremely poor status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Government actions and rhetoric created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all who do not practice Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'a Islam. Government-controlled media, including broadcasting and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly the Baha'is, following the June 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. There were reports of imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs. Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only legally recognized religious minorities; however, even members of these groups have reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. On November 22, 2005, unidentified persons killed a man who had converted to Christianity more than 10 years earlier. Reportedly, his death was followed by repression of and threats to other Christians, including arrests of 10 Christians. The Iranian Government regards the Baha'i faith as a heretical Islamic group with a political orientation that is antagonistic to the country's Islamic revolution, and continued to prohibit Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith. (Baha'is view themselves not as Muslims, but as an independent religion with origins in the Shi'a Islamic tradition.) Government restrictions on Sufi Muslim groups and houses of worship also became more pronounced during the year covered by this report, and Sufis reported the constant harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services. Although laws governing Sufi practice are ambiguous, there are reports that the government called for a full ban on the practice of Sufism.

Israel and Occupied Territories

Israeli law provides for freedom of worship, and the Israeli Government generally respects this right. In response to terrorist attacks in the Occupied Territories, Israel's strict closure policies frequently had the effect of restricting the ability of Palestinians to reach places of worship and practice their religions. The violence that has persisted since the beginning of the second Intifada, or uprising, in 2000 has significantly curtailed religious practice in many areas of the Occupied Territories and caused damage to places of worship and religious shrines there. The construction of a separation barrier by the Government of Israel also limited access to sacred sites, and

seriously impeded the work of religious organizations that provide humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians. Such impediments were not exclusive to religious believers or to religious organizations, and at times the government made efforts to lessen the impact on religious communities. The Government of Israel confiscated land (usually offering limited compensation, which churches did not accept) belonging to several religious institutions to build the barrier. Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), took steps to eliminate religious incitement, although incidents of such incitement still occurred. The Basic Law approved by the PA states that the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are "the main source of legislation." The strong correlation between religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Occupied Territories at times imbues the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a religious dimension. Rhetoric by Palestinian terrorist groups included expressions of anti-Semitism. Some Muslim religious leaders preached sermons on the official PA television station that also included expressions of anti-Semitism. However, on October 28, 2005, Israeli media quoted PLO Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat's statement that the Iranian president's declaration that Israel should be wiped off the map was "unacceptable." In the midst of growing chaos and lawlessness in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there were credible reports in previous years that PA security forces and judicial officials colluded with members of gangs to seize land from Christians. While there were no reports of Christians being targeted for extortion or abuse during the period covered by this report, the PA did not take action to investigate past injustices allegedly perpetrated by PA officials. Within Israel, problems continued to exist stemming primarily from the unequal treatment of religious minorities, and from the state's recognition of only Orthodox Jewish religious authorities in personal and some civil status matters concerning Jews. Relations among religious groups – between Jews and non-Jews, Muslims and Christians, secular and religious Jews, and among the different streams of Judaism – often were strained, and institutional, legal, and societal discrimination persisted against the country's Arab citizens.

Laos

In some areas, authorities continued to display intolerance for minority religious practice, especially by evangelical Christians. Christians were detained and arrested, or told to renounce their faith on threat of arrest or forceful eviction from their villages. In early 2006, a village chief in Oudomsai Province confiscated the land of several Christian families. A Christian in Salavan Province has been under house arrest since April 1, 2006, for refusing to renounce his faith. A group of displaced ethnic Hmong minors, sent over the border by Thai authorities, has been detained in Bolikhamsai Province since December 2005; some sources indicated that the Hmong were Christians and may have been detained in Laos in part due to their religious affiliation. Also in late 2005, village officials burned a Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) in Bokeo Province and six church leaders were arrested; five of the six were later released, but the other died after being transferred from jail to a military hospital. Conflicts between ethnic groups sometimes exacerbated religious tensions.

North Korea

Although the constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief," genuine religious freedom does not exist, and there was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. The government severely restricts religious freedom, including organized religious activity, except that which is supervised tightly by officially recognized groups linked to the government. Some foreigners who have visited the country stated that church services appeared staged and contained political content supportive of the regime. Outsiders have limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups, but it is generally assumed they are monitored closely. Defector reports continued to allege that they witnessed the arrests and execution of members of underground Christian churches by the regime in prior years. There is no reliable information on the number of religious detainees or prisoners, but there are unconfirmed reports that many people are detained for their religious beliefs and activities. Prison conditions are harsh; starvation and forced labor are common.

Pakistan

The country is an Islamic Republic. Islam is the state religion and the constitution requires that laws be consistent with it. The government took some steps to improve the treatment of religious minorities during the period covered by this report, but serious problems remained. Discriminatory

legislation and the government's failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different faith fostered religious intolerance and acts of violence and intimidation against religious minorities. The Ahmadiyya community continued to face legal bars to the practice of its faith. Anti-blasphemy laws provide the death penalty for defiling Islam or its prophets; life imprisonment for defiling, damaging, or desecrating the Qur'an; and 10 years' imprisonment for insulting the religious feelings of any citizen. These laws are often used to intimidate reform-minded Muslims, sectarian opponents and religious minorities, or to settle personal scores. "Hudood Ordinances" impose elements of Qur'anic law on both Muslims and non-Muslims and different legal standards for men and women. Religious leaders, representing the country's six major Shi'a and Sunni groups, issued a religious injunction in May 2005 banning sectarian violence and the killing of non-Muslims. However, except for the Federally Administered Northern Areas, the sectarian violence situation remained unchanged, which led to more than 110 deaths during the reporting period. Under government pressure, many of the leaders of Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, a coalition of Islamist political parties that leads the opposition in the national assembly, joined various interfaith efforts to promote religious tolerance. Anti-Ahmadi and anti-Semitic rhetoric continued unabated, although rhetoric against Ismaili followers of the Aga Khan was largely abandoned. The government worked with moderate religious leaders to organize programs on sectarian harmony and inter-faith understanding, maintained its ban on and actively attempted to curb the activities of sectarian and terrorist organizations, implemented a registration program for Islamic religious schools known as madrassahs, and continued with reform of the public education curriculum designed to end the teaching of religious intolerance. On July 1, 2006, President Musharraf instructed the Council on Islamic Ideology (CII) to prepare a revised Hudood Ordinance that eliminates discriminatory treatment of women and minorities not later than August 2006. In addition, the president ordered the release of all women detained under the current ordinance; according to local NGOs, approximately 700 women have been released.

Russia

The practice of religion was generally free for a significant majority of the population. However, some federal officials have taken actions that raise concerns about the Russian Government's consistency and vigilance in protecting religious freedom. In addition, some local and regional authorities have relied on provisions of the complex 1997 Law on Religion to restrict several minority religious groups. A 2004 court decision banning Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow continued to have significant negative ramifications for the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses during the reporting period. There were indications that the security services, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), increasingly treated the leadership of some minority religious groups as security threats. Popular attitudes toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups are negative in many regions, and there are manifestations of anti-Semitism as well as hostility toward Roman Catholics and other non-Orthodox Christian denominations. Some observant Muslims claimed harassment because of their faith. Instances of religiously motivated violence continued, although it often was difficult to determine whether xenophobic, religious, or ethnic prejudices were the primary motivation behind violent attacks. Some Russian Orthodox Church clergy have stated publicly their opposition to any expansion of the presence of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other non-Orthodox denominations. The Russian president and Government reacted quickly in condemning a January 2006 attack on a Moscow synagogue.

Saudi Arabia

Islam is the official religion, and the law requires that all citizens be Muslims. The government does not provide legal recognition or protection for freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice. The public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. As a matter of policy, the government confirmed that it guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice; however, this right is not always respected in practice and is not defined in law. During the reporting period, the government identified and confirmed its policies with regard to religious practice and tolerance in a number of key areas. The government continued a campaign against religious extremism, and top officials, including the king, continued to call for the promotion of tolerance. There were reports that some imams in their Friday sermons called for all citizens to show respect for other religious faiths, but denunciations from government-sanctioned pulpits of non-Muslim religions and the Shi'a branch

of Islam were also reported. The government enforces a strictly conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, and Muslims who do not adhere to it can face significant societal discrimination and serious repercussions at the hands of mutawwa'in (religious police, officially known as the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice). Reports of harassment of non-Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims by mutawwa'in continued, including raids of private residences and detentions of non-Muslims for religious violations, such as possession of non-Muslim literature or holding non-Muslim worship services; however, there were fewer reports than last year. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there was a decrease in both long-term and short-term detentions, and in arrests and deportations, of non-Muslims. However, there were also reports that mutawwa'in targeted several non-Muslim religious leaders and active members of non-Muslim religious groups for arrest and deportation. Many non-Muslims continued to worship in fear of harassment and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by police or mutawwa'in. Members of the Shi'a minority continued to face political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including discrimination in employment, little representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of mosques and community centers. However, the government made efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religions and within Islam. In December 2005, King Abdullah hosted a ministerial summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), inaugurating it with a call for moderation, tolerance, rejection of extremist violence, and reform of educational programs (including textbooks and curricula). The government clarified that it will continue to revise educational materials to remove disparaging references to other religious traditions, and to retrain or remove imams whose preaching promotes extremist religious thought.

Sri Lanka

The constitution accords Buddhism the "foremost place," but it is not recognized as the state religion. While the government publicly endorses the right of members of other faiths to freely practice their religion, in practice, there were problems in some areas. Anti-conversion legislation first introduced in 2004 remained under consideration. Despite generally amicable relations among persons of different faiths, there has been ongoing violent resistance by some Buddhists to Christian church activity, in particular that conducted by evangelical groups. There were sporadic attacks on Christian churches by Buddhist extremists and some societal tension due to ongoing allegations of forced conversions and debate on anti-conversion legislation.

Sudan

The 2005 Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the entire country, and there was some improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom in the period covered by this report. However, regional distinctions in the constitution, negotiated as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), have resulted in disparities in the treatment of religious minorities in the North and the South. The Interim National Constitution preserved Shari'a as a source of legislation in states outside southern Sudan, but recognized "popular consensus" and "the values and the customs of the people of Sudan, including their traditions and religious beliefs," as sources of legislation in the South. The Government of Southern Sudan generally respected the rights of Christians and Muslims in the 10 states of the south as provided for in its separate interim constitution, signed on December 5, 2005, but the new Government of National Unity (GNU) continued to place restrictions on Christians in the North, particularly by denying building permits for new churches. The national government required that all students in the North study Islam in school, regardless of whether they were Muslim, and even if enrolled in private, Christian schools. The Interim National Constitution calls for the establishment of a Commission for the Rights of Non-Muslims in the capital, Khartoum, to ensure that non-Muslims are not adversely affected by the application of Shari'a law there, but that had not taken place by the end of the period covered by this report. Relations among religious groups improved during the reporting period. Dialogue between Christian and Muslim groups continued under the auspices of the Sudan Inter-Religious Council (SIRC), a nongovernmental organization supported by the Government of National Unity, and the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), comprising Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant groups. The SIRC supported peace and reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims, sponsoring a conference on the role of religious leaders in peace building with the U.S. Institute of Peace in July 2005.

Turkmenistan

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and does not establish a state religion, but in practice the government continued to monitor all forms of religious expression. However, the status of government respect for religious freedom improved during the period covered by this report. The government's Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) was more willing to assist minority religious groups in resolving conflicts with other government agencies. On October 20, 2005, several government agencies hosted a roundtable discussion with leaders of registered religious groups to discuss registration procedures for branch religious groups and other related concerns. During the reporting period, the Government of Turkmenistan introduced a temporary procedure for registering branches of registered religious groups located outside of the capital, Ashgabat. However, the procedure was not clear and the implementation by government officials was not consistent. The Government of Turkmenistan limited the activities of unregistered religious congregations by prohibiting them from gathering publicly, proselytizing, and disseminating religious materials. Government officials outside the capital often interpreted the law more strictly than those in Ashgabat. Although the level of harassment continued to decrease for registered religious groups, most unregistered groups continued to experience official harassment, including detention, arrest, confiscation of religious literature and materials, pressure to abandon religious beliefs, and threats of eviction and job loss. There were reports of abuse for religious belief or observance, and there were several accounts of persons being detained for questioning in connection with practicing their faith. To better facilitate government control of mosques, the Turkmen Government replaced a number of Sunni Muslim imams with individuals believed to be less independent in their interpretations of Islam.

Uzbekistan

There was a decline in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government continued to restrict these rights in practice. The government permits the operation of approved Muslim groups, Jewish groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various other Christian denominations, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists. The law prohibits or severely restricts activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction. A number of minority religious groups, including congregations of a variety of Christian denominations, had difficulty satisfying the strict registration requirements set out by the law. There were several reports that Christian congregations were denied registration on spurious technical grounds. As in previous years, Protestant groups with ethnic Uzbek members reported operating in a climate of harassment and fear. Law enforcement officials raided and harassed some registered groups, several of which were de-registered and closed. The government continued its campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups suspected of extremist sentiments or activities, arresting numerous alleged members of these groups and sentencing them to lengthy jail terms. Many of these were suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a banned extremist Islamic political movement. Many others were conservative Muslims whose beliefs or teachings differed from those of state-sanctioned clerics. The government pressured the banned Islamic group Akromiya (Akromiylar), especially in Tashkent and Andijon, with those actions spilling over into violence and deaths in Andijon in May 2005. A small but growing number of "underground" mosques operated under the close scrutiny of religious authorities and the security services. Mosques operating without registration are technically illegal and only operate with the indulgence of the local government.

Vietnam

Overall, respect for religious freedom in Vietnam improved during the period covered by this report. Both the constitution and law provide for freedom of worship; however, the government continued to restrict organized activities of religious groups that it declared to be at variance with State laws and policies. The government attempts to regulate religious practice through a legal framework, the foundation of which is the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief, which requires that the government officially sanction the organization and activities of all religious denominations. A number of positive legal reforms adopted in recent years remained in the early stages of implementation. The 2005 implementation decree for the Ordinance delineates established guidelines for religious denominations to register their activities and seek official recognition. The 2005 "Instruction on Protestantism" promulgated by the prime minister directs officials to assist unrecognized Protestant denominations in registering their activities so that they

can practice openly. The Instruction also calls on the Vietnamese Government to facilitate gathering for worship during the registration process. Protestant believers in the Central Highlands reported significant improvements in their situation. Furthermore, the government began to promote registration of Protestant house churches in northern Vietnam and the Northwest Highlands region, but progress was slow and the Vietnamese Government stated that only six previously unregistered northern congregations were allowed to legally register their activities during the reporting period. Despite several confirmed reports of police harassment and beatings of unregistered believers, Protestants across the north reported improvement in most officials' attitudes towards religious practice, and in general Protestants were allowed to gather for worship without significant harassment. Restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of some religious groups remained in place, and the Vietnamese Government maintained a prominent role in supervising recognized religions. Religious leaders encountered greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities that the government perceived as political activism or a challenge to its rule. The Government of Vietnam continued to ban and actively discourage participation in one unrecognized faction of the Hoa Hao Buddhists. The government also actively restricted the leadership of the unrecognized United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and maintained that it will not recognize this organization under its current leadership. The Catholic Church reported that the government continued to ease restrictions on church assignment of new clergy but indicated that it would like to open additional seminaries in the North. During the period covered by this report, the government released four prominent prisoners viewed by various sources as having been imprisoned in connection with religious activities.